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ABSTRACT

This ERIC digest addresses problems associated with children's excessive viewing of television programs and commercials and provides suggestions to help parents guide their children's television viewing. Children who watch television 3 to 5 hours a day have little time for other activities such as play, reading, and talking with others. Excessive television viewing may have a detrimental effect on children's learning and school performance. The amount of violence depicted on television is increasing. The average child views more than 20,000 commercials a year, and by doing so, may acquire a distorted picture of appropriate eating habits. A recent study found a direct relationship between amount of television viewing and children's risk of obesity. In this digest, parents who wish to address the problems associated with excessive television viewing are advised to: (1) know how much television their children watch and set limits on the amount of viewing; (2) encourage their children to plan their viewing; (3) watch television with their children and provide interpretations of excesses and distortions, such as violent actions; (4) encourage their children to watch programs that depict characters who cooperate and care for each other; (5) call their local stations and write or call networks or sponsors to express their feelings about programming; and (6) join with other concerned parents and public action groups. (RH)

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Guidelines for Family Television Viewing

Children in the U.S. view an average of 3-5 hours of television daily. It is difficult to document effects of such extensive television exposure on children. However, research indicates that television viewing may be linked to violent or aggressive behavior, obesity, poor academic performance, precocious sexuality, and the use of drugs or alcohol. Thus, it is important that parents help their children use television as a positive, creative force, and help them avoid television's negative influences.

Aspects of Viewing

1. *Time spent watching television.* When children spend 3-5 hours a day watching television, time for other activities is severely limited. Childhood is a period of growth and development, when children need to play, alone and with other children. Children need to read and talk with other children and adults.

2. *Violence on television.* The amount of violence on television is increasing. A recent report from the National Institute of Mental Health indicates that television violence can be harmful to young children. Children can become frightened, worried or suspicious from watching violence on TV. Researchers have also found that children who watch many violent programs tend to be more aggressive than other children on the playground and in class. Parents should realize that viewing violent programs may encourage their children's tendency toward aggression. Parents also need to keep in mind that television often portrays sexual behavior and the use of alcohol or drugs in realistic or inviting terms.

3. *TV and learning.* Many recent studies indicate that excessive television viewing may have a detrimental effect on learning and school performance. The hours spent viewing television interfere with homework and limit the time available for other ways of learning. If a child is not performing well academically, television watching may be a strong factor contributing to the problem.

4. *Commercials.* The average child sees more than 20,000 commercials a year. Advertisers spend roughly $700 million annually to make sure that their sales pitches reach large numbers of children. The majority of food advertising is for heavily sugared products such as candy and presweetened cereal. Commercials for meat, milk products, bread, and juice make up only about 4% of the food ads shown during children's viewing time. This emphasis can give children a distorted picture of how they ought to eat. A recent study found a direct relationship between amount of television viewing and children's risk of obesity.

Guidelines for Parents

Here are some ideas that will help parents guide their children's TV viewing:

1. *Set limits.* Know how many hours of television your children watch. Limit your children's viewing to one or two hours per day. Don't be afraid to reduce the amount of television your children watch. Your children probably won't like being kept away from the television set. Television is seductive. The programs your children watch are apt to be filled with commercials promoting other programs. The word-of-mouth campaign that goes on in playgrounds and school cafeterias is powerful and pervasive. But establishing good habits for your children is worth the effort. Television watching is often more habit than choice.

Don't be surprised if your children go through a sort of withdrawal when the television time is reduced. You can ease the transition by encouraging alternative activities such as sports, games, chores, reading, conversation, or hobbies. You can help by joining your children in these activities. Because children model their behavior after their parents' example, an examination of your own television viewing habits may also help. Be a good model yourself.

Eliminate some TV watching by setting a few basic rules, such as no television during meals, or before household tasks or homework are completed.

2. *Plan.* Encourage children to plan their viewing by using a *TV Guide* or newspaper listing rather than flipping the channels to decide what to watch. The set should go on only for specific programs, and it should go off when they are over. Approach a television program as you would a movie. Help children decide which show to see, and talk about the show after it ends. Select programs that feature children in your child's age range. Try to balance action, comedy, fine arts, and sports.

Don't reward or withhold television in order to punish. Such practices make television seem even more important.

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3. *Participate.* Know what your children watch on television. Watch with them and talk about the programs. TV programs may help you discuss difficult topics such as sex and war. Follow up interesting programs with library books. Explain situations that are confusing. Ask the child about his or her responses to the program when it is over. Discuss the difference between fantasy and reality. The worst program may be a good experience for your children if you are there to help them get the right message, while the best program may be wasted without your encouragement to think, evaluate, and question.

Parents who watch television with their children will be able to point out that violence on television is not real, and that the actor has not actually been killed or maimed. Parents can also show disapproval of the violent episodes and stress that such behavior is not the best way to resolve a problem. By discussing the violence shown on television, parents can lessen its impact.

The best solution, of course, is for parents to eliminate the most violent programs from their children's schedule. Remember that lock-out devices will ensure that certain channels cannot be seen. If you are offended by certain programs and intend to forbid your children to watch them, try to communicate your reasons. If your children are watching a program, and you see behavior to which you object, tell them so, and explain your objection.

The Center for Early Education and Development's publication *How Can I Guide My Child's TV Viewing?* lists psychologist John Murray's recommendations for actions parents can take to deal with violent programs:

- Watch at least one episode of each program your child watches so you know how violent it is.
- When you are viewing together, discuss the violence with your child. Talk about why the violence happened and how painful it was. Ask your child for ideas about how the conflict could have been resolved without violence.
- Explain to your child how violence on entertainment programs is faked and what might happen if other people casually tried these same stunts.
- Encourage your child to watch programs with characters who cooperate and care for each other. Such programs have been shown to influence children in positive ways.

4. *Resist commercials.* Don't expect your children to resist commercials for candy and snack foods without help from you. The ability to see through a sales pitch is learned fairly late and with difficulty. Poor eating habits can be picked up early and with ease. Advertisers have market researchers, writers, producers, and saturation campaigns with big budgets on their side. When your children request foods and toys advertised on television, teach them that television makes them want things they don't necessarily need and that may even be harmful. Help the child analyze commercials. Note the exaggerated claims, and the fact that the makers of the product pay for advertising.

5. *Express your views.* The most effective way to change commercials or programs is to call your local television station. When you are offended or pleased by something on television, let the station manager know. Write or call the network or the program's sponsor. Stations, networks, and sponsors are all concerned about the effects of television on children and are responsive to parents' concerns. Be specific. Don't call or write just to complain. It is also important to voice your approval. Programs you like may not have high ratings, and your support may help keep them on the air.

If you feel a commercial is inaccurate or misleading, write down the name of the product, the channel, the time you saw the commercial, and a brief description of your concern. Then call your local Better Business Bureau with this information, or send it to the Children's Advertising Review Unit, Council of Better Business Bureaus, Inc., 845 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10022.

6. *Get help.* Action for Children's Television (ACT, 20 University Road, Cambridge, MA 02138) has been a leading public interest group.

This ERIC Digest was adapted from two publications:

How Can I Guide My Child's TV Viewing? from the Center for Early Education and Development of the University of Minnesota, and

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For More Information

Cecil, Nancy Lee. "Help Children Become More Critical TV Watchers." *PTA Today* 13 (April, 1988): 12-14.

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